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ABSTRACT

This mid-1984 "snapshot" of the Austin Independent School District (AISD) focuses on three areas: (1) the state of learning in AISD schools as measured by achievement test results for college bound seniors, graduates, and high achieving, average, and low achieving students; (2) the changes needed in compensatory programs for low achieving students; and (3) the impact of recent state legislation. Common themes to guide the school system through the 1980's include: (1) more time skills development and priority on elementary mathematics for low achievers; (2) adjusting curricular and instructional strategies to criteria for promotion and graduation specified by the Essential Elements established by House Bill 246; and (3) long-range planning. (BS)

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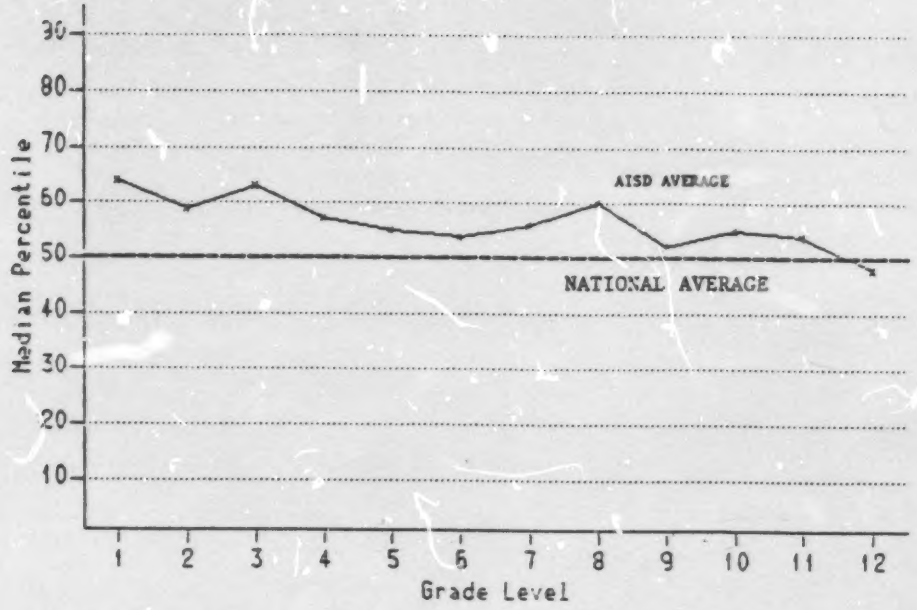

Figure 1. AISD ACHIEVEMENT TEST AVERAGES, 1983-84, NATIONAL NORMS. Median Composite Score on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills in grades 1-8 and the Tests of Achievement and Proficiency in grades 9-12. The national average is the 50th percentile.

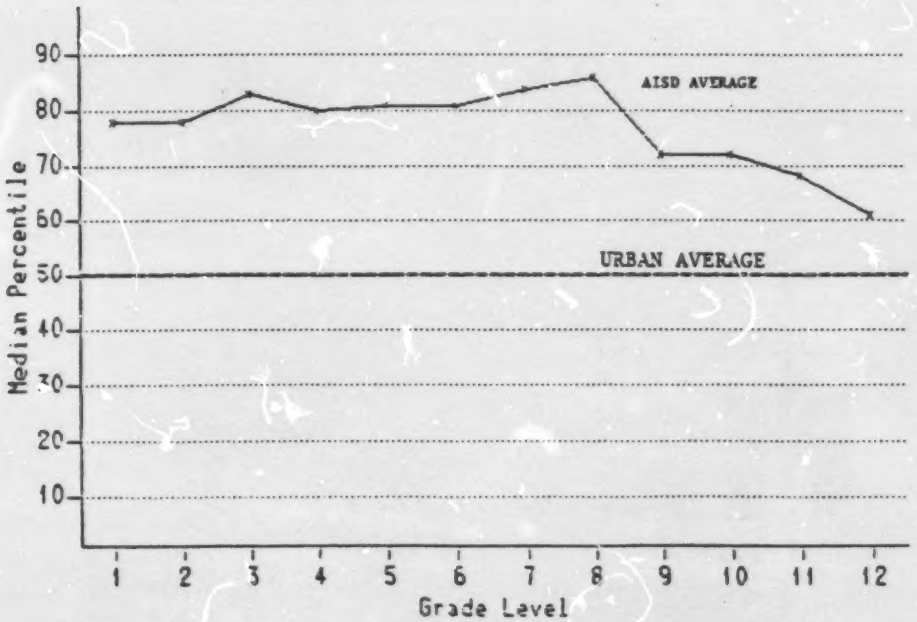

Figure 2. AISD ACHIEVEMENT TEST AVERAGES, 1983-84, URBAN NORMS. Median Composite Score on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills in grades 1-8 and the Tests of Achievement and Proficiency in grades 9-12. The urban district average is the 50th percentile.

The State of Learning in Our Schools

We must acknowledge up front that achievement test scores are only one measure of our schools' effectiveness. However, achievement tests are one of the few common measures we share with schools across the nation. Just as we must look at more than achievement tests to judge our schools' effectiveness, we must look at more than one type of achievement test to judge the performance of the full range of students.

- College-bound seniors who take the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in AISD outperform both the state and national averages. The number of our students recognized in the National Merit Scholarship competition is three times the average number for a school system the size of AISD.

- Graduates from AISD high schools are required to demonstrate at least ninth-grade level skills in both reading and mathematics on one of several achievement tests (Austin's BEST, ITBS, TAP, or TABS). In 1983-84, only 6% of the graduates (other than untestable special education students) failed to do so. Nationally, about 20% of the seniors score below this level on achievement tests.

- High-achieving students, those who score above the 90th percentile on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS), represent three to four times the percentage of AISD students compared to high achievers in other urban districts.

- Average students in AISD are above national averages on the ITBS and TAP in grades 1-11. Nationally, the achievement of average students has risen over the past few years. The average student in AISD has not only kept pace with this improvement, but has moved up faster in most areas.

- Low-achieving students in AISD perform at about the average for low achievers around the State. On the statewide Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS), AISD has a smaller percentage of low achievers in reading than most other Texas urban districts; however, at the elementary level, AISD has a higher percentage of low achievers in mathematics than most others.

Our expectation is that AISD students should achieve higher than others around the state, across the nation, and especially in other urban districts. This expectation is far exceeded by our high achieving students. Our average students meet this expectation. Low-achieving students, especially in mathematics at the elementary level, are not currently meeting this expectation.

The Need for Changes in Compensatory Programs

Our compensatory programs are targeted at the low-achieving students enrolled in our schools. The fact that low achievers are the one group of students not meeting our expectation for AISD to be the highest ranked among the eight Texas urban districts focuses our attention on the effectiveness of our compensatory programs.

Is it time for dramatic changes in our compensatory education programs? There are indications that the time for change is here.

- Achievement gains in reading by compensatory education students have peaked at about .9 GE per year (1.0 is the average for all students).
    - This learning rate is not adequate for our low achievers to keep pace with average students, much less to make up any disadvantage they have.
    - Granted, the .9 GE gain per year is higher than the national average of .6 to .8 for low achievers, but this merely indicates that our compensatory programs are good, not good enough.
- AISD has concentrated solely on reading skills while our ranking in mathematics has declined among the Texas urban districts. Meanwhile, a national evaluation of Chapter 1 programs has shown mathematics to be very teachable to low achievers.
- Texas has newly identified Essential Elements that are to be the targeted basic skills for all instruction.
- We do know from our evaluations that some approaches work and some do not. We continue to use some that have never been productive.

What has tended to be unproductive in compensatory education programs?

- Pulling students out of their regular classrooms for isolated programs.
- Turning over instruction from a certified teacher to an aide.
- Summer school programs of four to six weeks with teachers and students who are unfamiliar with each other and a daily schedule that contains limited direct-instruction time.
- General staff-development activities.
- Providing remedial instruction from a resource teacher to kindergarten students.

What has proven successful?

- Supervision and support of teachers by instructional coordinators with clear goals and objectives.
- Lowering the pupil/teacher ratio to 15 to 1 in kindergarten and first grade instead of hiring resource teachers.
- Concentration of services on the lowest achievers and delivery of services over an extended time (at least a year).
- Team teaching with close coordination of instruction among teachers instead of pulling students out to go to a resource teacher who works in isolation.
- Early childhood education for four-year-old high-risk children.
- Extending the instructional time in the school day or school year.

What should we do?

1. Continue efforts to:

   - Reduce pullout arrangements,
   - Coordinate instruction between the Chapter 1 teacher and the regular teacher--especially in pullout arrangements,
   - Communicate clear goals through close supervision by instructional coordinators,
   - Concentrate services on the lowest achieving students,
   - Avoid the overlap of services to the same students by multiple programs,
   - Hire certified teachers rather than instructional aides,
   - Emphasize direct instruction to students rather than indirect services (i.e., counseling, parental involvement, staff development, curriculum development, etc.),
   - Expand early childhood programs, and
   - Encourage kindergarten participation.

2. Begin efforts to:

   - Make the Essential Elements, now mandated by House Bill 246, the primary focus of instruction in compensatory programs,
   - Include mathematics as an instructional focus,
   - Exclude kindergarten from service, and
   - Develop an intensive, expanded summer school program.

3. Solve the logistical problems to:

   - Extend the school day and the school year for compensatory instruction.

4. Change the federal laws or implement an excess-cost plan to allow programs to:

   - Reduce the pupil/teacher ratio in kindergarten and grade 1.

The Impact of Recent State Legislation

While everyone is struggling to cope with the details of implementing regulations from the 1981 House Bill 246 and to decipher the mandates of the month-old House Bill 72, there must be consideration given to the great opportunity these educational reforms provide us. Four critical opportunities are now at hand.

1. To accomplish essential long-range planning within the structure of AISD's five-year accreditation plan. A new five-year plan is to be developed in 1984-85 and will be effective from 1985 through 1990. Systemwide goals and objectives must be established to guide the District. This is a tremendous opportunity to merge all of what is new in requirements with what AISD as a local school system wishes to accomplish.

2. To establish a management information system that provides essential information at the time decisions must be made. With the computer hardware and software available now, a system that makes data about AISD easily accessible is possible. A greater coordination and streamlining of data collection throughout AISD should be planned to ensure that the management information system contains the data currently required by everyone plus the additional data required for the annual performance reports mandated by both House Bill 246 and House Bill 72.

3. To clarify and improve the application of criteria for promotion and graduation. With the establishment of the Essential Elements by HB 246, AISD knows the skills that must be the basis for promotion decisions. With the mandate of statewide minimum competency exams in reading and mathematics by HB 72, AISD's existing graduation competency program must be thoroughly reconsidered.

4. To focus on maximizing instructional use of time in the classroom. Both laws emphasize the importance of instructional time. HB 246 provides for clear time allotments for instructional areas on a daily or weekly basis. As one example of the impact of these allotments, AISD elementary students currently receive about 40 minutes per day of mathematics instruction compared to the 60 minutes per day to be required in 1985-86.

Common Themes

Across the three major areas just discussed there are several common themes that should serve to guide our school system through the end of the 80's.

1. Elementary Mathematics. Our low achievers need more skills development, our time allotment must increase by 50% to meet the new statewide requirements, and our compensatory programs currently place little or no priority on mathematics.

2. Essential Elements. The criteria in terms of specific skills for passing courses, being promoted, and earning a diploma are now more clearly specified. The measurement of each student's skill levels will occur more carefully and more frequently. Curricula and instructional strategies must recognize and adjust to these changes.

3. Long-Range Planning. AISD's opportunity for long-range planning is better than ever. The timing of new legislative mandates, the five-year accreditation plan for 1985-1990, and the capability for developing a management information system present us with the context for productive planning.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, 1984 will be remembered as the beginning of the reform movement in Texas education. The opportunities that are at hand now may surpass any we have been presented at a single time in the past. Will we direct substantial energies to teaching the Essential Elements, especially elementary methematic skills? Will we take advantage of the opportunity to accomplish meaningful, long-range planning? Will we change our compensatory education programs to increase the learning rate of our lowest achievers?

The recent AISD history of success in meeting challenges would suggest a "yes" response to these questions.

Office of Research and Evaluation publication number 84.10. For more information on results cited here or for evaluation reports of individual evaluations, call ORE at 458-1227.